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1896  
CHM

PROPOSED PLAN  
OF THE  
COOPER UNION MUSEUM  
FOR THE  
ARTS OF DECORATION

COOPER UNION MUSEUM PROPOSED PLAN

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Presented by  
Erskine Hewitt,  
January 9, 1936.

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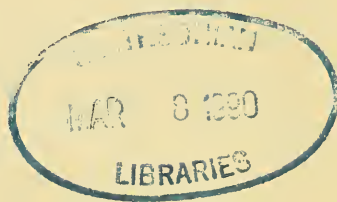
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BY  
ELIZABETH BISLAND  
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First Printing 1896  
Second Printing 1928

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By ELIZABETH BISLAND.

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**T**HE aim of the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration is to establish in New York City an institution similar to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs of Paris; a museum which has done much to develop and maintain French supremacy in the finer forms of the industrial arts. A slight historical sketch of that admirable foundation will show what the New York museum hopes to accomplish.

In 1863, thirteen French designers and manufacturers—including in their number a furniture manufacturer, a goldsmith, a carpet maker, a wallpaper maker, Erard, the builder of pianos, a lace maker and a caster of bronzes—met to form a “Society for applying the fine arts to industrial manufacture.” Their reasons for this step were that “since the London Exposition of 1851 an immense advance in the art of manufacture has taken place throughout Europe, and while France has not lagged behind, we cannot conceal from ourselves that our old supremacy has not been maintained. We recognize that new efforts must be made if we are not to be left behind in the general progress. English manufactures especially, which before that date were very much behind from the point of view of art, have made prodigious strides, and if they continue to advance at the same rate will soon distance us.”

They found that though there were schools of music and oratory, of sculpture and of painting, they looked in



vain for a school which should extend similar advantages to the industrial laborers, and they resolved to found a society whose effort should be to give an equal stimulus to manufactures. A society which should "devote itself to the culture of beauty as applied to the useful, to aid designers and workers in the fields of industry; to excite artistic emulation among the artisans; to encourage the general love of the beautiful and to develop the public taste." To this end they founded a museum of industrial art; a library to assist the artisan in his researches; special courses of lectures upon applied arts and occasional loan exhibitions.

This scheme was received at once with general favor and men eminent in all departments of national art and labor gave it their encouragement and aid. Barye was one of the early members, as was Klagmann, Deck, Champfleury, Léon de Laborde, Carrière-Belleuse and others of equal fame. Since 1865, twelve loan exhibits have been held, devoted to the study of ceramics, of work in metal and in wood, of tapestries and carpets, costumes, oriental art, furniture, the arts of women, fabrics, glass and stone. A museum was opened in 1877, filled with the contributions of the members and with gifts from generous collectors. Since then the museum has received Government aid (in the characteristic French fashion of a permission to hold a lottery from which a very large profit was realized), and to-day this splendid collection numbers more than 8,000 articles, of a value somewhat in excess of 1,800,000 francs (more than \$350,000), and occupies 3,000 square metres of space. Equally important is the library in the Place de Vosges (purposely placed in the centre of the artisan's quarter of Paris), which contains 7,000 volumes, 250,000 engravings and photographs, 100,000 original designs by celebrated well-known designers and 280,000 samples of stuffs and fabrics, many of them antique. Since its opening 110,000 workmen have made use of this library.

One of the most important departments of the museum is that devoted to making casts of all such beautiful and historic objects as are unattainable in the original, and anything from an entire room to a decorative nailhead or beautiful key can be reproduced in plaster and displayed in the halls of the museum. There is also a photographic studio maintained for the purpose of securing pictures of architecture, stone work, furniture, textiles, etc., or, indeed, anything which will admit of no other means of reproduction.

The system of classification of these enormous collections is simple and admirable. All the products of industrial art are grouped under two heads.

1. The Decoration of Edifices—exterior and interior.
2. The Decoration of Man, and the objects of his use.

Under the head of Exterior Decoration come three groups.

1. Architecture.
2. Sculpture Applied to Architecture.
3. Painting Applied to Architecture.

This last including mosaic and ceramic decoration, and all decoration in color.

The department of interior decoration is divided into two groups, each with four sub-divisions.

1. Stationary Decoration.
  - a. Woodwork.
  - b. Painting.
  - c. Hangings.
  - d. Metal Work.
2. Movable Decoration.
  - a. Ebonizing.
  - b. Pottery.
  - c. Metal Work.
  - d. Various objects of art.

Under the second head—The Decoration of Man and the Objects of his Use—are four groups:

1. Costumes.
2. Arms.
3. Instruments.
4. Means of Instruction (books, engravings, photographs, etc.)

All these groups are arranged chronologically, and it is possible under this system to study the methods of manufacture and decoration from the earliest periods, through all the changes of taste and fashion down to the present day.

The prompt recognition and warm encouragement of this Museum of Decorative Arts showed how great was the need of it, and the constant use made of it by so large a number of designers and artisans has had its natural result in the stimulation and development of French manufactures. Its most important work, however, has been as an educator of public taste. Workers who have constantly before them the last results of the labor of many generations in their own trades must necessarily have their conception of beauty refined and enlarged and be aroused to the possibilities lying in the material upon which they are engaged. Perhaps the most interesting thing to be seen in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs is the earnest attention and pleasure in the faces of the workmen who frequent it, and who are measuring, copying, or giving general study to the masterpieces of their own trades. Such is the Parisian Museum, and it is upon the same lines that the new Museum for the Arts of Decoration at the Cooper Union is endeavoring to carry out its work.

In some respects the rules and regulations will differ from those of its model—the endeavor being to make the museum of the utmost practical use, and to encourage the full use of its advantages by removing all tedious restrictions and formalities as far as it is possible.



There will be no members—the rooms being thrown open to the public for general use and the only formality required to gain admission will be to stop at the General Office of the Cooper Union and ask for a card.

The only official will be a curator, and there will be no catalogues, as every object will be labelled distinctly, stating its nature, origin and history; the grouping and arrangement will be such that the student will be put *en rapport* at once with the place of the object he is studying in the history of manufacture or art.

The exhibits will be supplemented by elaborate encyclopædic scrap books of pictures with collections made from every quarter, bearing directly upon the objects to be studied. Take for example the subject of mural decoration. In this department will be found many beautiful plaster casts showing the manner of different periods, and following the subject into the scrap books it will be found to be supplemented by a collection of photographs, engravings, drawings and color sketches, all grouped historically and labelled with their nature and national origin clearly stated, so that all the knowledge to be obtained on the matter is within easy reach of the hand and eye.

These again are reinforced by books of reference from the Reference Library, which is to be one of the adjuncts of the museum. It will be entirely permissible here, as in the Paris Musée, to make measurements, copies, tracings, or sketches, for either private or business use, and every aid will be given by the curator; the picture scrap-books being specially arranged to facilitate tracings.

The value and need of such an institution in New York City requires no explanation. Not alone the workman should benefit by the facilities it affords. The purchaser will find it as useful as will the manufacturer, if a carriage is to be built, a book bound, a door lock needed, a stair rail carved, a piece of plate designed, or a house decorated. An intending purchaser can familiarize himself with the best that has been

done in any one of these departments, and can demand that his purchase shall not fall below their best standards of beauty, or his money secure less than its proper value in loveliness. The practical value of such an institution needs not to be pointed out, but it is as an educator of the public standard of taste that this museum hopes to do its best work.

Government aid in America is not to be looked for as in France. Here everything is left to private enterprise and the public spirit of the individual.

The Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration owes its foundation to the efforts of the granddaughters of Peter Cooper in memory of the great and constant interest he always evinced in the education and welfare of artisans, but aid by contributions of money and art objects has been given by those who approved its purpose, and further contributions in both kinds are hoped for from all those who recognize the place and purpose of beauty in our national life—not only for its refining and enlivening influence, but for its definite commercial value as well.

A committee will pass upon all objects contributed before acceptance, as it is essential that the artistic standard of the museum should be carefully maintained. Contributions to the picture scrap-books will also be gladly received—photographs of art objects, of architecture and decorations, cuttings from art journals, from magazines, or even catalogues are desired—whatever bears upon or illustrates the progress or history of industrial art is of value, and will aid the American workman and manufacturer to elevate the character of their products.

Despite the great development of American art and manufactures in the last decade, so much still remains to be done to place us on a level with Europe, that the need of all such spurs to renewed effort requires no urging. The fine arts have not lacked for encouragement, and the result of that encouragement is to be read even by those who run; but art as applied to industry has been less appreciated and aided, with

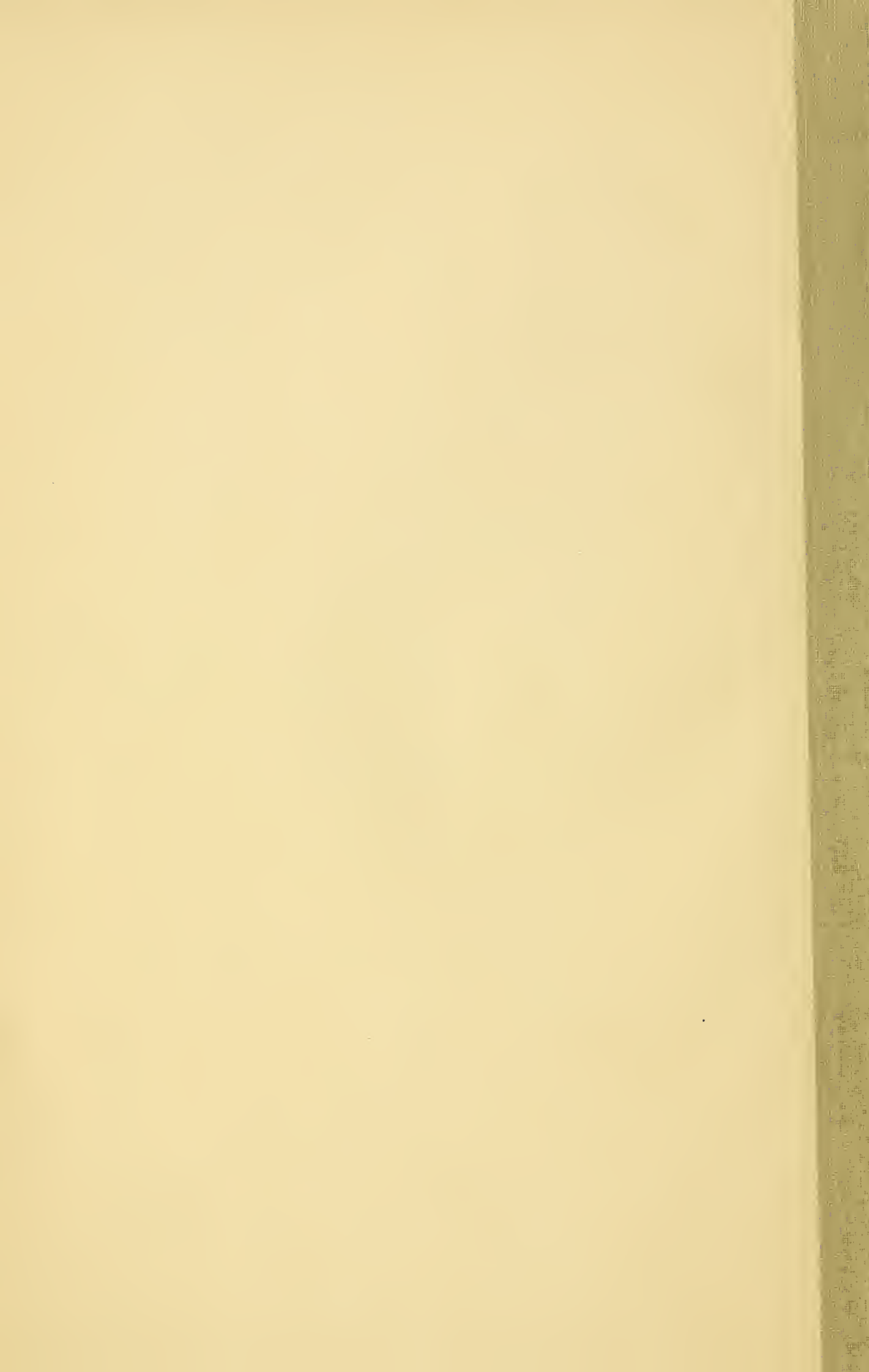
the result that for the best work in decoration we have still to depend upon foreign skill and taste. In almost all trades requiring artistic skill the best paid workmen are foreigners, whose sense of beauty has been trained by just such means as are offered by this new museum. Collections of beautiful specimens of art applied to industry, and the scarcity of artisans able to do this higher type of work, which requires an innate love of the beautiful to perfect, has made beautiful decoration unduly expensive. Admirable schools of design already exist, but after the hand has been trained the impulse of love and familiarity with beauty still is wanting, and such knowledge can only be acquired by the inspiration which comes from familiarity with masterpieces. It is impossible that any large number of artisans can be sent abroad for that training which painters, sculptors, and architects seek in the European treasure houses of Art, but photographs and plaster reproductions can bring to their own doors the forms of beauty whose influence they need. The general museums of art do much in this direction, but lack of labelling, the restraints of formal rules, and the general tendency to collect fine arts rather than examples of decoration, leaves a very definite want still unfilled—a want which the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration hopes in some measure to supply.

ELIZABETH BISLAND.











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